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BIRTH AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE HUNGARIAN FOLK EPIC

121 I wish to discuss the folk epic in the broadest sense of that term, that is, including all such verbal folk tradition as can be classified neither as lyrical nor as dramatic, and is of an epical nature in the sense of narrating something.

The everyday conversation of the people, how they recount the minor events of their lives, and how they communicate to each other their observations, all belong within the class of the folk epic. So do their proverbs, for their formulation is often epical, and we shall see how closely they are related to common conversation. Moreover, anecdotes, stories, legends, etc., are by nature epical literary forms.

So I wish to discuss the life of these folk epics. I want to examine what objectives regulate the everyday speech of the people, how the more fixed forms are born and how they affect each other, and what quantitative relationships there exist between the individual literary forms. Also, when and under what circumstances these literary forms appeared; in one word, what their life is.

This procedure aims at observing the external manifestations of the folk epic, but it can often point up the most profound relationships and illuminate in an interesting manner the life of the people.

(I did the work of collecting the material in the Hegyhát district of Baranya county, and in the Dombóvár district of Tolna county. My findings apply first of all to the folk epic of this region.)

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000 The generally recognized literary forms of the folk epic are the folktale, the legend, the anecdote and the joke; to this group belong also the proverb, the riddle and the versified narrative epic. But we cannot limit the folk epic to these alone, because the everyday speech of the people is also included on the basis of that most

important criterion, its narrative character. And the everyday speech of the people is characterized by conscious, or at least instinctive, search after and selection of form. Some people (usually the older ones) have set forms they use in telling of certain events. These are usually only the constantly recurring peculiarities of one person, but sometimes they become common property in the sense that others use them too. They become primitive proverbs or illustrative anecdotes. In this manner we have an almost unbroken line of gradual development from the most ordinary conversation to the story or anecdote.

The borderline between the more developed forms of everyday conversation and the actual literary forms of the folk epic is reached when the speaker becomes aware that he is now performing for the entertainment of an audience. /2/ Since we have only one generally applicable term to denote artistry with words, I may call this awareness the "literary awareness of the people." This consists of the speaker assuming the demeanor of the performer, and his hearers becoming an audience. This dividing line is felt by the community, and it is given expression in quite a simple manner.

I can elucidate with examples what I want to say.

First of all, I wish to point out how the people try to make their everyday speech more colorful, more vivid, more "poetic." 195 538

I used to chat with an old man who took part in the war as a militiaman; he used to yarn about his wartime memories. I would sound certain chords at random, and he would always recount his memories in the same set form: "When we paraded on the pasture at Cinkota." Or, "We had a sergeant, by name of Kraculak, may God rest his soul (I am telling this after his death), but I never had a bad word out of him in sixteen months."

Or, in speaking about the struggles of his youth: "When I became a servant at Dombó, two carriages came after me, though even one could have taken my paraphernalia. I was there for eleven months, and they came after me with five carriages."

We could quote many similar examples from his yarns, or from those of others. But he had recounted these stories often, and he had always tried to tell them in the most expressive form (the paraphernalia he acquired at Dombo in a year); these forms had proven to be the best, and they became set. Even in their accounts of events of lesser significance and in their most common everyday conversation, we find them trying to achieve the same. But the forms born everyday in this manner do not crystallize to become set

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538 forms, since the next day they must yield their place to other expressions.

But they spice their everyday speech by using the set expressions of other people, usually citing them by name. In a small circle, these expressions become common property.

The same old man used to quote from the sayings of rich, haughty Auntie Kata Szé (1): "Auntie Kata Szé used to say, 'When I was born, God had a well-set table.'" They also quote by name the saying of a long-dead village notary to his shiftless sons: "You will become nothing more than door-handle-pushers."

Often such a saying becomes much-quoted because of one queerly pronounced word. For instance, Pali R. once said concerning his nieces: "It 's a pistol they need, a pistol!" [Tr. Note: orig. 'piszo.']

Sometimes recounting some more interesting event brings up some such anecdote bound to a person's name. In telling each other of their adventures in the forest, they would recount the following little event that happened to Antal V. While Antal V. was bringing wood from the forest, his axe-handle broke. As he was still in the forest, he cut down a nice little tree for an axe-handle. The noise brought the forester over. Antal V. defended himself, saying that he had only cut the little tree because his axe-handle had broken.

Said the forester to him: "How dare you cut down a tree here?"

"Well, I can't cut one in the hempfield."

"Did you get permission for this from the prince's offices?" [3]

"Well, that's not where it broke."

Thereupon the forester went away as though he had been slapped in the face. (This last formula is one that is frequently used as the punch line of such anecdotes.)

They tell about the afore-mentioned Auntie Kata Szé that she once asked the threshers - to whom the farmer used to give food - what they wanted for lunch, since she could serve them anything. One of the threshers said she should make egg-barley out of dry dough. But this she could not make.

These are already anecdotes of a modest nature, but they have no independent existence. They are not told as independent, amusing stories. No description of the situation, such as that above, usually precedes the telling of the anecdote concerning Antal V. because they are just talking about their own similar adventures in the forest. Or they tell it when Antal V. 's roguishness has been mentioned. They tell similar anecdotes with a more general identification of those

involved, as "about the man from Dómba," or in an even more general form "about a man of a certain time," "about a woman of a certain time."

These forms, precisely because their content hides a moral, usually play the role of proverbs. But these minor anecdotes are also of an entertaining nature and, as their entertaining purpose is strengthened and their content is broadened, they tend to become independent anecdotes.

From the same starting point we can also arrive at the proverbs. In their everyday speech people try to express what they have to say in a tight, brief structure, and if they succeed in finding some good expression, then it becomes a set one. Those of the forms which circulate in a restricted circle are just the expressions of one person. If others take them up, then they quote him by name. The more general the validity of the truth contained in such a saying, the more people take it up and use it. Thus we find, almost without any skipping, all of the intermediary forms between such more set formulations of everyday speech and the generally known proverbs.

For instance, old Ignác P. used to say about himself: "I never was one to make work." [Literally: "I never was sire to work."]

Old Pali B. used to quote what he heard from a lady as she instructed her daughter: "She would always tell her, 'My girl, start small, finish large.'"

When one goes to do one's official errands, one has no way of knowing when one will finish. This is expressed by the following form: "Who goes before the masters doesn't know when he is coming home."

The manservant lives with the family, eats and works with its members, but usually his lot is not the best. This form characterizes that situation: "Soup keeps the servant; oaths and curses, the master."

Old Ignác P. expresses his peasant's consciousness with this saying: "The good citizen (wealthier farmer) is like a willow stump, they trim him, in time he buds, and then he gives a nice shade."

These two have become proverbs already:

"He is a man just like what the drill throws up, neither wood nor shaving."

"One can tell from which milk the curds are made."

Essentially, the real proverb does not differ from these; e.g. "Every bag finds its patch."

195 /4/ Such are the proverbs of the people. They do not quote them sep-
538 arately using them only to illuminate or lend color to some passage in their speech. And they use them to a greater extent than the generally known proverbs.

Wanderers, youths who, as blacksmiths or millers or soldiers, have been to the city, bring back with them from there some slang sayings, such as "Are we going on foot or by sewing-machine?", or "Good-day to you, glad to see," etc. The other youths learn these sayings from them, and whereas this certainly gives them a certain amount of interest, especially in the eyes of the girls, the sayings do not become an integral part of their folk heritage, but die out in a few years.

Our less long-winded city "jokes," to which the daily newspapers treat us every day, are almost entirely unknown to them. They do take up one or two of the anecdotes of the calendars which are particularly applicable to them.

On the other hand, the various types of proverbs and anecdotes form a significant part of their everyday speech. In fact, their use is a sign of assimilation into the group, and of efforts made in that
[543] direction. The region of Tolna and Baranya where I collected my materials is an area of mixed nationality. Those Germans who are being assimilated or who are sympathetic use these forms consciously. This consciousness is evident even in their facial expressions and tone of voice, until complete assimilation has occurred. The use or avoidance of these forms is a measure of the blending and in-feeling or of the extent to which they are set apart, respectively, of the railroad men and factory workers living in the villages.

The frontier of the literary awareness of the people is found in approximately this region. Everything mentioned so far is incidental
539 to the everyday speech of the people. But the following, still modest anecdote is told for the prupose of providing entertainment. (Told by József Ács, farmer of Gerényes, Baranya county, aged 63.)

King Mátyás one day assigned his engineers to measure Mt. Gellért, to see how many bushels it would make. He gave them a month's measuring, that is a month's time; otherwise he would strip them of their diplomas, or ranks, if they could not measure it.

On the last day, as they went to measure, they met a gipsy. Of course, their hopes were lost. Said the gipsy: "Hey, gentlemen, give me a little piece of a cigar."

The chief engineer said to him: "As though we were in the mood to smoke cigars! Not that we have any cigars!"

So he said: "What is bothering the gentlemen that they are so sad; perhaps I could help." 539

The chief engineer brought himself to tell the gipsy of the task that King Mátyás had assigned to them.

The gipsy said: "But, gentlemen, the whole thing is simple. Tell King Mátyás that if the bushel were larger than the mountain, then it wouldn't even make one."

Now, of course, there appeared not only pieces of cigars but even whole cigars.

The chief engineer reported to King Mátyás that they had finished with the measuring.

[5] "Well, if you have finished, tell me how many bushels it makes."

Said the chief engineer: "Your majesty, if the bushel were larger than the mountain, it wouldn't even make one."

"Well, I know that you learned this from some gipsy."

Such an anecdote has an independent existence. There are, of course, external conditions for its presentation (congenial company for some protracted period, etc.). Riddles exist almost entirely in this form.

The external signs of consciousness are visible to the eye, and they could be an indication of the artistic value of what is to be recounted. Something like "Well, I'll tell one too" is sufficient introduction for posing a riddle or telling an anecdote. Story-telling requires care in laying the groundwork. The story-teller must be called and asked to tell a story. The child, too, asks for a story. Sometimes there exists only this external circumstance: that the mood requires a story. And if at such a time there is not a professional story-teller in the company, then the one who can do so best, tells the story. 538 195

The most restricted literary form of the folk epic is the ballad. In addition to its inner rigidities, its outer form is fixed, too. The groundwork for this must be laid with even greater care than for the story. But it is as though the wind of culture had already swept away this literary form. Only on the rarest occasions is there that elevated mood which is necessary for the singing of ballads. Some old men and women do know very beautiful ballads, but they sing them only on the rarest occasions. Sometimes at a festival or a wedding feast they ask an old singer to sing some old songs, and then he will sing some ballads too, but always solo. As far as my memory serves me, they have never sung ballads in chorus in this region. 538 [533]

The texts of folk customs are classed mostly as lyrical, and

538 partly as dramatic. But the folk customs are dying too. The 'Kotyolás' [Translater's Note: the children go about reciting for treats] on St. Lucia's Day and the subrikálás [Translator's Note: symbolic flagellation] on Childermas Day still exist in stunted form. The nativity play has become a source of income for the gipsies. The old traditional texts of the New Year's toasts have been supplanted by new ones learned from books.

But stories, jokes, anecdotes can still be found in large numbers. These are the literary forms of the folk epic the existence of which is still unbroken in this region.

Now, after the general discussion of the existence of the folk epic I can talk of the existence of its literary forms. I shall maintain my procedure and examine the externals of their existence. That means, I shall relate those experiences which were given rise to by listening to stories and by collecting them.

THE DEMEANOR OF THE STORY-TELLER TOWARD HIS AUDIENCE

Types of Story-tellers.

The story, anecdote, etc. are literary forms of folk literature. The material is traditional, but it changes constantly. Each performance is an individual artistic phenomenon. Whoever tells the story constructs it anew each time from the traditional materials. In this sense he is the author of the story. And as author, he leaves on the story the imprint of his personality, his spiritual structure and his social position.

I am examining the manifestation of the story-teller's personality [6] from the standpoint of the demeanor he adopts toward his audience. This demeanor is determined by his character, his personality and, last but not least, his social position.

On adding up my observations, I came to an interesting conclusion which is so strikingly pat that it may give rise to the suspicion that I was working with a predetermined pattern in mind. To dispel this suspicion, I shall describe my methods.

First, I characterized separately the demeanor of each story-teller. At this point, I felt already that there was some relationship in demeanor between the individual story-tellers. The next step was a first classification on the basis of such relationships. By taking into account further relationships, I arrived at broader classifications.

As the final result of the work of categorizing,[1] there were two large groups, and some story-tellers who either fell outside these groups or rose above them. When the two groups were before me, listed by name, I noticed that the final dividing line between them was identical with the dividing line between the rich and the poor among them. 538 565

It is necessary that I give the local conception of these two terms. The rich - they call them (pógár), that is, 'citizen' - are those who live on their own property, not having to depend on working for others. The lower limit of the material foundations for such a status is a farm of seventeen to twenty acres. This class is fairly uniform, because a farm of over forty-three acres is a great rarity, and even if there is one of eighty-five acres in every fifth village, its owner cannot constitute his own society. 565 829 [423]

The other category is that of the "poor man." To this belong the field-guards, the laborers, the small-holders who have an acre or two, etc. Of course, within these broad limits there are many subdivisions, but it does seem that the most important dividing line is between those who live on their own substance and those who depend on working for others for their living. This is shown by the conscious distinction implied in the use of "citizen" and "poor man."

I have noticed that the demeanor of persons of identical spiritual structure differs according to whether one belongs among the "citizens" and the other among the "poor men." 538 [154]

In both of these groups there exist extreme types. Among the poor, it is the professional story-teller, whom I shall name, without meaning to cast any reflection, the 'minstrel type.' Among the rich, it is the 'gentleman anecdote-teller.'

I found a swineherd story-teller to be the prototype of the minstrel group. He was the only one of my story-tellers who was not even twenty years old. He had heard many stories and anecdotes, and he had learned to tell them. He already had the technique of a story-teller. The following occurence is very characteristic of his demeanor.

I always used to ask the story-teller where he had learned the story he had just told. Concerning one of them, he said that he had thought it up himself. He said this about a fairly well-known story, and within barely a week I noted two variations of the same story in two nearby villages.

Nevertheless, there is something in the story that did originate with him. He had probably heard the story a long time before, and

[1] [See p. 7, cat. 116 -- Analyst]

538 needing more material in the course of his practice as an entertainer and story-teller, he revived in his memory the shreds of his old story, reconstructing it himself in the form in which he told it. This is evident in the story, too. The triple adventure which occurs in it, [7] he handled in the most unfortunate manner: he repeated one of the adventures. In the story, the king assigns three difficult tasks to the ingenious poor lad. The culmination of these is a separate adventure, which is in the nature of a happy ending. The king's daughter must be brought out of hell. This is, of course, successfully done, the poor lad becomes king, and there follows the wedding and the feast.

One of the adventures is that the youth must steal a very well guarded horse from the stables of the king. He contrives this by giving the guards some brandy mixed with a sleeping draught, and driving the horse away when they have fallen asleep. This adventure is found in the same form in all three variations. In the story of the swineherd, though, the same adventure occurs twice, with the difference that on the second occasion, the poor lad must steal one hundred horses, which he does by the same method.

This is an innovation made by the swineherd himself, though not with very good sense. Perhaps he wanted to heighten the effect in this way. This effort is even more obvious in his description of the wedding feast, where he conveys the abundance of food with astonishingly grotesque images: the dogs drank coffee from buckets, the roast was distributed with pitchforks, the poppy-seed was spread on the strudel with wooden pitchforks. The audience acknowledged these details with outbreaks of laughter. But it is also possible that behind this grotesque food imagery there lies the desire for nourishment on the part of his long-starved inner self.

It is also very characteristic that when I asked him for a story he told me this one first.

The extreme in the demeanor of the rich is reached by the gentleman anecdote-teller. I modelled this type after two men. As it happened, these two were the richest among all my story-tellers. Both of them were men between thirty and forty, and one was a judge in his village. They told only anecdotes, using the manner of a gentleman entertaining his guest. Only, this demeanor was conscious, and this showed on them. They related even their most interesting anecdotes coolly. Not with the snickering consciousness of the minstrel, but with gentlemanly detachment. It is characteristic that they told anecdotes of society: not of King Mátyás, but of lawyers,

538 with whom they probably had the most trouble.

Very close to this type is another story-teller, the wealthier old citizen. He told folk tales and anecdotes, but he told them in the coolest manner. He was very careful not to let himself drop into the role of the minstrel. He communicated, rather than related, the stories. In his cool demeanor, he went almost to the limit beyond which the interest of the stories would have suffered.

The intermediate types tend to approach each other. Poor men with more relaxed feelings, soft-voiced charming old men and women, young men aware of their own worth constitute this group among the poor people. Friendly men, good-humored women and self-assured young men constitute it among the rich people. But they are distinguished from each other by that calm feeling of security which exists in the rich, but is lacking in the poor.

[156] [565] A very interesting new type[1] is the group of 'bohemians.' It is here that we can see most clearly the difference caused, despite identical personalities, by the social status. The bohemians among the poor take almost no account of the village morals [8] as they apply to them. Their demeanor in telling a story is not identical with that of the minstrels, but it is very close to it. Story-telling is a highly favored form of expression for their own free good-humor. They have no consideration for the possible desires of their audience.

The richer bohemians are noticeably restricted by the fact that they belong among the "citizens." They cannot overstep with impunity the bounds of the conduct of the "citizen." They exert their bohemian natures within certain petty bourgeois bounds. Their favored modes of expression are conversation and story-telling.

The following type is represented in both groups, but with different shadings. Using the name of a well-known character from Hungarian literature, I shall name them the 'János Hárv type.' They have good a memory, and they know old things. But they immediately turn the conversation toward themselves, and relate adventures concerning themselves that are of the János Háry type.

The poor man must tell much bigger things of himself before he becomes interesting. And in attempting this, he does not even notice that he becomes ridiculous if he oversteps the bounds of probability by too much. He wants to maintain his reputation by constantly repeating his adventures, never noticing that people are laughing at him behind his back.

1 [of story-teller. For more data - see cat. 538, pp. 7-12--Analyst]

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The richer János Háry types satisfy their urge to boast with more forethought, or circumspection.

For instance, one of them is today a rich man, but he started life as a poor man. He was present in a group where I was collecting stories, and he asked me himself to write down the story of his life. In describing the more outstanding, interesting events, he spoke of himself in the third person. He was more or less patting himself on the back in this manner. Probably his misuse of the word "politician" also stems from his basic János Háry mood.

Another manifestation of the János Háry type is the 'admired' man. His wife is this man's constant admirer. She is constantly bustling about him. One can notice no other disturbing factor about the anecdotes of this old man than conceit.

The most valuable member of this group is the "literary peasant" He would like to "show himself" in some more serious manner. The one on whom I modelled this type had written a book about the history of his family. He took up the thread with his great-grandfather. He went to various parishes, collected data from the registers; he is also saving a few old documents. In the history of his family, he tells about his great-grandfather (not about himself) stories very similar to the adventure with the wolf and the tale about the curbing of the bull in the Toldi Legend. He notes down for himself everything that is related to this region. He has read two local legends, and has copied them carefully. He read one of them in the monograph of Baranya county, while the other was written by a local teacher in the Hegyhát dialect. The legend is in dialogue form and concerns King Rudolf. I was unable to determine its origin. On the basis of its language and content, its folk origin seems probable, but its dialogue form is suspicious. The teacher in question, who could settle the matter, is no longer alive. Our literary man copied the tale, and he also copied the explanatory note following the title that it is in "the Hegyhát dialect." (We are in Hegyhát.) He feels himself somewhat above the rest of the villagers. But his half-developed individuality is comical, or rather tragi-comical.

(9) Some story - tellers are left out of this classification. One of them does not even properly belong within the divisions of the village society: a retired railroad man. He lives in the village, and he has not been isolated from it; it is just that the circumstances attendant on the social situation do not restrict him. He is both bohemian and minstrel, but he is an 'independent story-teller.' He talks with the desire for instant success, telling mostly anecdotes.

538 He tells very long and complex, but very enjoyable anecdotes, desire is fulfilled, for the general opinion concerning him is that "one has to laugh so much with old B."

Social differences do not constitute a dividing line in the group of the best story-tellers. There are rich and poor alike in it. Their demeanor is 'independent--artistic.' They know very beautiful stories. In telling them, they give themselves entirely over to the story. Their independence is not of social origins, but seems to be nourished by the assurance of building up the stories.

Among them is my most productive story-teller, an elderly, well-to-do citizen. He talks with an artist's ambition, and some inner compulsion seems to drive him to story-telling. He is happy when I go to him for a story.

Also to this group belongs the one who told me perhaps the most beautiful story: a poor young woman. She only used to tell stories to her children, in a soft sweet voice and with an unconscious artistic sense.

István Banó

[-- In the original, there follows a summary in German of the foregoing paper. -- Translator] 1